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# The significance of context: autonomy and curriculum reform in rural schools

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In the large volume of research on curriculum reform, very little attention is paid to the implications of geographical location, yet, this can be significant. The current curriculum reform process in Wales has presented an opportunity for schools to radically change their practice. While rural schools have welcomed this opportunity, they face challenges unrecognised by the wider educational establishment. This article presents a view of the reform process from school level, using data from semi-structured interviews with teachers working on curriculum reform. Thematic analysis reveals enthusiastic responses to reform and the greater autonomy it promises. There are, however, challenges, including concerns about staffing, access to professional learning and learners' access to extra-curricular learning. The research demonstrates that while rural schools face challenges unique to their location, their response to reform demonstrates a capacity for independent action in line with the aspirations of the new curriculum.

**Keywords:** curriculum reform; autonomy; geographical location; rural schools; community engagement; professional learning

## Introduction and background literature

The current curriculum reform process in Wales, following the publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), has presented an opportunity for schools to radically change their practice, developing a curriculum 'Designed by teachers. Built for children' (Welsh Government, 2019). This paper, based on a small-scale exploratory study, examines the diverse responses of rural schools to the process and explores the impact of context on curriculum development. Welsh Government initiated a reform process led by a network of Pioneer Schools, chosen both for their consistently strong performance and to represent the diversity of schools across Wales, including rural schools (Welsh Government, 2017a). The Pioneer Schools nominated a Pioneer Lead Teacher to collaborate with colleagues from other Pioneer Schools in developing the Areas of Learning and Experiences (AoLEs) around which the curriculum will be structured<sup>1</sup> (Donaldson, 2015).

Interviews with key staff from a sample of rural Pioneer Schools illuminated the schools' experience of the process. Analysis of the interviews demonstrates how the

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schools have addressed learners' needs and how diverse aspects of their rural location affect staffing and opportunities for professional learning.

Welsh Government documentation refers to rural schools (Welsh Government, 2017b), including several in the list of Pioneer Schools, but does not provide a precise definition. The term 'rural school' is used more frequently in the literature from outside Wales. In a quantitative study on attainment in England, for example, Odell (2017) used an index of isolation based on the time it would take to drive between schools. A study of parental choice (Walker & Clark, 2010) focused on three schools in close proximity located in a county with a low population density, while Milbourne (2004) noted that in rural areas of the UK, journeys to educational institutions are twice as long as in other areas. In other contexts, formal definitions apply, for example, in the US, rural towns are defined as those with a population of fewer than 2500 (Bauch, 2001). In Australia, rural towns are more than 70 km from the state capital or 25km from a regional centre with a population of over 10,000 (Starr, 2016). Greenough and Nelson (2015) discuss the variety within rural schools in terms of remoteness, size (including growth or decline), ethnicity and poverty and explore the implications for educational researchers. Welsh Government (2008) provided broad guidance with the caveat that different definitions are appropriate for different purposes. Recognising the range of perspectives, this paper will draw on literature using various definitions as, depending on the origin, purpose and context of the paper, each offers insights into different aspects of rurality.

While schools in Wales are not remote on the same scale as those in the USA, Canada or Australia, the literature nevertheless provides some relevant perspectives. One is the position of the school in the community and its impact on learners. In an influential article, Bauch (2001) argued that although pupils in rural schools may face disadvantages,

*one of the advantages they have is that their schools are set in a community context that values a sense of place and offers a unique set of conditions for building the social capital important for helping students succeed in school. (p. 204)*

In a broader study of deprivation, however, Duncan (2014) identified limited access to cultural resources in rural areas as presenting a challenge to schools. A case study of high-performing rural schools across the US (Barley & Beesley, 2007) reported features contributing to success, including high expectations, support for learning, teacher retention and professional development. In addition, the schools' position and status in the community was seen as significant, evidenced by teachers' personal links to the school through their children's attendance and by the schools' central role in the local community. Such relationships may be fostered by formal partnerships, by the school making its facilities available or through the contributions of community members to the life of the school. Similar features were evident in high-performing rural schools in California (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), where effective links were often found to be on a personal rather than a structural level and where schools and school leaders were 'highly visible' (p. 15) in the community. Both studies identify ways in which rural schools develop their curriculum to meet the needs of pupils in specific contexts through, for example, links with local business (Kitchen & Marsden, 2011). Similarly, a review of the work of all-through schools

in Scotland stresses the capacity of rural schools to prepare pupils for opportunities in their local area while at the same time acknowledging the importance of opportunities further afield (H.M.I.E., 2010). In contrast, it has been argued (Downes & Roberts, 2018) that centrally imposed curricula may fail to reflect the context in which pupils are learning and that an understanding of this rural context is vital for leaders and policy makers (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2016).

Curriculum reform outside Wales provides insights into the challenges and opportunities at individual and institutional levels and into both the structure of the curriculum and the process of reform. Based on a case study of schools in Scotland, institutional challenges include teachers' commitment to their current practice; changes in school staff; and different approaches to professional learning (Priestley *et al.*, 2014). Teachers were concerned about the impact of reform to subject content and pedagogy on the integrity of their subject (Priestley, 2011). In curriculum reform in Hong Kong, however, Lee *et al.* (2018) found that cultural change in the educational system overall is necessary for the effective implementation of curriculum reform. A different perspective, with teacher-driven change as part of a long-term evolutionary process, is reported by Bascia *et al.* (2014) in a study of teachers in Ontario in which teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2012) was considered to be a key element. In Finland, Pyhältö *et al.* (2018) found that teachers and district leaders worked towards 'shared sense-making' (p. 181) in the process of curriculum reform with a focus on bridging the potential top-down/bottom-up divide to create sustainable solutions. Teachers and district leaders were conscious of their autonomy in the process and the responsibility it conferred. A similar point is made by Tronsmo (2019), who notes that collective responsibility requires effective leadership to facilitate change. Recent studies of curriculum reform highlight challenges but also recognise the impact of increased autonomy on schools and teachers. Place-based education, although originally more focused on environmental issues, shares some of the priorities of *Successful Futures* (2015) including the emphasis on experience, on multidisciplinary working and on connections with place and community (Gruenewald, 2003; Penetito, 2009; Demarest, 2015).

Teachers are central to the process of reform in Wales but recruitment in rural schools can be problematic; research in international contexts has highlighted some challenges. In Australia, for example, researchers argue that problems are severe: rural schools are harder to staff, have a higher turnover and teachers working outside their expertise (Downes & Roberts, 2018). However, other studies suggest that various factors, both professional and personal, contribute to the stability of staffing over time, for example, teacher autonomy or teachers living in the community, especially in a desirable location such as a national park (Barley & Beesley, 2007). There is evidence that teachers are likely to stay in the area where they have their first teaching post (Barter, 2008; Fowles *et al.*, 2014) so from a school's perspective, the quality of first appointments is important, as is the quality of subsequent professional learning. Surveys of professional learning in high-performing systems emphasise the importance of collaborative learning and school autonomy to the culture as a whole and to teachers' efficacy (Butler *et al.*, 2015; Black *et al.*, 2016; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017).

The curriculum development process in Wales reflects the collaborative approach consistent with its ambition to generate system-wide change in Wales. The new curriculum is underpinned by the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, defined as ‘encouraging local ownership and responsibility within a clear national framework of expectation and support’ (Donaldson, 2015, p. 99, 2016). At this stage, in the process, several questions arise: are the schools demonstrating or developing autonomy in addressing learners’ needs; how will rural schools respond to staffing needs; and do teachers in rural schools have access to professional learning opportunities?

## **Research methods**

### *Overview*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers involved directly or indirectly in the reform process with a focus on their experience in schools at different stages of trialling new approaches. The constant factor for the Pioneer Lead teachers was their involvement in AoLE meetings; semi-structured interviews allowed them to share their reflections on the experience (Ellili-Cherif & Hadba, 2017; Peterson & Bentley, 2017).

### *Sample and process*

The sample of schools was purposeful and, to some extent, homogeneous (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019): three schools were identified initially on the basis of their status as Pioneer Schools and their location. The characteristics of local areas were compared to establish aspects of rurality, for example, settlement size and local occupations. The schools are in two of the counties identified by Welsh Government (2008) as rural and are located in small towns (Woods, 2011) with a population of around 3000 people according to the 2011 census and in counties with the lowest population density in Wales (O.N.S., 2011). The schools themselves serve both the town and rural populations and are more diverse in character: numbers on roll are between 300 and 800; FSM is between 7% and 11% (less than the national average); and the schools vary in linguistic profile from bilingual, to English with significant Welsh, to English-medium.<sup>2</sup> Taking the sample as a whole, the schools serve communities which have several features in common, other than linguistic character, while the schools themselves are distinctive.

The interviews were carried out between May and July 2018 with the Pioneer Lead teacher in each school as a key interviewee. In addition, headteachers were interviewed in two of the schools. Other teachers were interviewed for their perceptions of the process within the school. Nine teachers were interviewed in all, see Table 1 for details.

The interviews were face-to-face, ranging from 30 minutes to one hour and were recorded. The core questions focused on teachers’ experience of the Pioneer process (Pioneer Lead teachers only); the experience of collaboration with other schools; staffing; and the opportunities for developing a curriculum to meet the needs of their learners. Interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were sent to interviewees to allow them to check accuracy. There were no comments or amendments made.

Table 1. List of schools and teachers (all names have been changed)

School	Teacher	Role
Ysgol y Parc	Ms Ellis	Headteacher
	Ms Graham	Pioneer Lead teacher
	Ms Walker	Teacher
	Ms Anderson	Teacher
	Ms Buck	Teacher
Ysgol y Canol	Mr Morton	Pioneer Lead teacher
Ysgol y Mynydd	Ms Jackson	Headteacher
	Ms Huws	Pioneer Lead teacher
	Ms Harding	Teacher

The transcripts were coded iteratively, using lean codes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) in the first instance, which were then grouped into themes for analysis (Saldana, 2011).

## Findings

### *Overview*

As noted previously, the new curriculum is underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity and the schools in the sample recognised the opportunity this presents, giving teachers and pupils greater influence over the curriculum. While this applies equally in all schools, rural and urban, the focus in this paper is the extent to which rural schools used the opportunity to meet needs arising from their location. The teachers' observations reflect a range of experiences and concerns expressed in the midst of the reform process.

### *Rural learners and the new curriculum*

*Working with AoLE.* Consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, each school used their work with the AoLE groups to develop a project to meet their learners' needs, including: the development of learners' Welsh; linking learning with rural occupations; the impact of social isolation; and access to extra-curricular experiences.

Ysgol y Mynydd worked on the development of learners' Welsh as its Pioneer focus was the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE. In a cross-curricular project with an external practitioner, learners worked on the theme of *Cantre'r Gwaelod* and teachers noted a definite impact on the learners' Welsh as they used the language throughout the three days of the project.

Ysgol y Canol, working on the Health and Wellbeing AoLE, used collapsed timetable days to focus on health while building in cross-curricular links. A Year 7 unit of work used Mars bars to explore food production, transportation and nutrition. Working with a nearby supermarket, learners completed a 'brain-food questionnaire'



and used an app to calculate calories burned in various activities with an explicit link to local occupations:

*[I]t was more authentic in terms of rurality because we [included] the farming background of some of the pupils... they could work out if they baled for an hour or whatever, then they knew they were burning off this amount of calories. [Mr Morton]*

The school adapted the task to learners' everyday experience, especially to engage those from farming backgrounds.

In the same school, Year 9 learners chose the focus of a health and well-being day and elected to work on mental health. The school used the learners' choice of topic as a vehicle to address the issue of isolation and social media:

*Some pupils will go home and they will be down a track on their own and they won't be able to go to as many clubs as may be expected in inner cities and I think that reliance or over-reliance on social media then to make friends and to keep friends is an issue. [Mr Morton]*

While concerns about social media are common in schools, the rural context frames the anxiety in a slightly different way. In a rural area, geographical isolation may affect young people and social media can mitigate this effect. At the same time, the risks may be magnified by young people's dependence on social media to maintain friendships (Primack *et al.*, 2019).

The schools identified learners' needs in relation to their specific local context and developed appropriate projects. The approach to curriculum development is consistent both with subsidiarity and with aspects of place-based learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Penitito, 2009; Demarest, 2015).

*Accessing extra-curricular learning experiences.* Some interviewees saw the 'Experience' element of the AoLEs as signalling a change of expectation from current provision, in that, what would now be considered extra-curricular learning would be more central. While the international literature suggests that participation in extra-curricular activities is a strength in small rural schools (Jimerson, 2006), in rural Wales, there is a concern that an increased emphasis on such activities could be challenging in terms of cost and travel. It is worth noting, however, that this interpretation of 'experience' is not explicit in *Successful Futures* (2015); the source of the term is acknowledged as *The Curriculum from 5-16* (H.M.I., 1985), signalling that the curriculum is more than subject teaching and includes all aspects of the learners' experience. Nevertheless, the sample schools felt a responsibility to address a perceived deficit in that learners in rural areas have fewer opportunities to access 'cultural literacy' [Ms Ellis] (Duncan, 2014). Although the school is in a small town, some of its students live in smaller settlements or isolated farms so Ysgol y Parc offers learners a variety of activities including cultural exchanges, visits from specialist speakers and outdoor learning experiences.

The provision of wider learning experiences is a priority because the schools perceive that their learners are disadvantaged and, while schools have always sought to address this, there is concern that new arrangements might create a greater strain on resources.

*Schools in their communities*

*Community as curriculum resource.* Working with local businesses, schools are developing a curriculum rooted in the needs of their learners and the community. The businesses identified by teachers are important employers in the towns and include tourism, waste management and building construction and maintenance. Collaboration with local business is consistent with the new curriculum's aim to develop learners' knowledge of their communities and to offer authentic experiences to learners (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Kitchen & Marsden, 2011; Donaldson, 2015).

The use of Welsh is integral to business and community life in some rural areas and Ysgol y Mynydd is part of Cymraeg 2050<sup>3</sup> (Welsh Government, 2017c). The role complements the school's Pioneer focus on developing learners' Welsh and the Pioneer Lead teacher notes the challenges the school faces with learners who:

*... [J]ust don't see the value of Welsh because there's not much of it in the area. [Ms Huws]*

The focus on Welsh in the community helps learners recognise the value of their communication skills in Welsh beyond school, using the example of a local business to demonstrate the importance of language skills for employability:

*We've had the owner of a [local] company to come in and talk about how he has encouraged his workforce to develop skills in Welsh to give them a better position in negotiating with the local community. [Ms Jackson]*

In an area where employment opportunities are limited so that many young people aspire to move away, the school's engagement with local businesses highlights employment opportunities available locally (Kitchen & Marsden, 2011; Welsh Government, 2017c), especially for those with good bilingual skills:

*We all are afraid that our young people will leave the area and not come back. We want to encourage young people to stay in the area and take the jobs that are there and maybe to develop their own businesses as well in the future. [Ms Jackson]*

In a rural area, where tourism is important, contacts with the catering and hospitality sector are especially valuable in bringing opportunities to life. The food technology teacher brings additional excitement to lessons by inviting a professional chef to give demonstrations:

*A chef comes in and there's all these knives - it is more impressive. [Ms Harding]*

The school recognises that limited employment opportunities in rural areas contribute to the cycle of younger people leaving the area and is attempting to address the problem (Bauch, 2001; Kitchen & Marsden, 2011; Welsh Government, 2017c). There are similar community ties in all the schools in the sample: Ysgol y Canol works with the local supermarket; Ysgol y Parc has links with a local building company offering a variety of opportunities for work experience and employment.



*Schools as a community resource.* The links between school and community are mutual: schools draw on community resources and return the contribution in a variety of ways. Ysgol y Mynydd's participation in Cymraeg 2050 has been the impetus for a range of community events sharing the school's resources and expertise in promoting the use of Welsh and opportunities to learn the language. The headteacher also stressed that the location of the school is a factor in its relationship with the community, echoing the concept of visibility identified by Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009):

*We are located centrally to the town ... so we are easily accessible for local people in the community to come in and contribute to the school or for us to go out into the community. [Ms Jackson]*

Ysgol y Parc provides community resources in other ways such as facilities to which feeder schools would otherwise have no access as well as managing the leisure centre and town library. Sharing facilities with the community and with feeder schools benefits the school in the longer term with learners having access throughout their primary years and out of school (Bauch, 2001; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

The relationships between the schools and their immediate communities are more than school-family links; resources are dedicated to developing and maintaining relationships which mutually benefit the school and community. Notwithstanding the differences between the experience of Welsh schools and those in the USA, similar school and community links are valued in both. The new curriculum aspires to create learners who are knowledgeable about their community and who have access to authentic experiences (Donaldson, 2015); the foundations for these aspirations are established in rural schools and have the potential for further development.

### *Recruitment, expertise and adaptability*

Staffing and recruitment underpin the curriculum and in small rural schools, it is common for teachers to teach more than one subject and, in some contexts, this is regarded as a strength:

*[Staff are] all experts in the subjects that they teach but they're also very willing to support one another and ... to take on another subject ... every one of our teachers teaches more than one subject and again that's the nature of small rural schools. [Ms Jackson]*

In Ysgol y Mynydd, the headteacher values subject specialism and all interviewees here stressed the importance of being able to work with colleagues and work across more than one subject (Downes & Roberts, 2018). The school celebrates the adaptability of its staff and their willingness to collaborate internally. In some contexts, however, it was recognised that the structure of the new curriculum into AoLE could be perceived as a threat to subject expertise (Priestley, 2011). Ysgol y Parc has responded to this with a series of cross-curricular Big Questions in Year 7 and 8, but delivered by subject specialists as the school leadership recognised that reform around AoLEs could potentially be seen as a threat to teachers' identity and was proactive in managing the potential for disillusionment.

In smaller schools, teaching across more than one subject is seen as an advantage and their teachers are well positioned to embrace changes which might require them

to work outside their specialist area. In schools with larger departments, school leaders felt that teachers valued their identity as subject specialists and carefully managed developments which might be seen as potentially threatening to that identity.

The findings on recruitment were inconsistent across the sample and reflected unique local circumstances rather than rurality in general (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Remoteness rather than rurality is identified as a key factor in areas where recruitment is a challenge; limited employment opportunities in isolated areas were seen as a factor discouraging experienced teachers with partners and families from moving into the area. Headteachers did not see the rural location as the most significant factor in either attracting or discouraging staff, reflecting different ways of interpreting rurality as noted by Walker and Clarke (2010) and Odell (2017):

*Access to professional learning for teachers in rural schools*

As part of the development process, Pioneer Lead teachers attended regular meetings out of school and they valued the opportunity (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Butler *et al.*, 2015; Black *et al.*, 2016; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017), both for their own development and for their schools' benefit:

*Having the opportunity to trial things in your own school, being on that cutting edge of curriculum development and being able to really sort of bring it to fruition. [Mr Morton]*

There are, however, challenges for rural schools in that teachers' time in travelling to meetings has to be taken into account and headteachers must make judgements about the best use of staff time. Although the schools were compensated for the teachers' time in the initial phase of the process, there were concerns about the impact on current learners of teachers being out of the classroom. The Pioneer Lead teachers from the rural schools identified similar problems but elaborated on them from the perspective of a participant:

*In terms of collaboration of teaching staff [we are] obviously highly isolated compared to other schools. [Mr Morton]*

They were working with colleagues from all over Wales so it was natural that they should compare their experiences with people from other schools. Their enthusiasm and commitment were balanced by a degree of frustration in that teachers in more urban areas had more informal opportunities to develop the work and required less time out of school. The teachers in the rural Pioneer Schools would have welcomed more informal opportunities to collaborate on their projects (Bascia *et al.*, 2014; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016).

The work of the AoLE groups was shared with headteachers but there was frustration that opportunities to share work with other teachers were missed:

*I went to the cluster secondary heads last week and there was another local school that was there presenting and I thought . . . why couldn't we invite all the health and wellbeing staff from the school? [Mr Morton]*

This experience fuelled anxieties about how the reformed curriculum will be shared and developed in schools:

*If the professional development is going to be on the level they want, there's got to be that recognition of the rurality of schools... without the expectation of OK let's all go down to Llanelli for the day, let's all go to Cardiff for the day. [Mr Morton]*

Teachers in rural areas are already accustomed to travelling to meetings so there is no suggestion that they are unwilling to do so. The frustration expressed by both the headteachers and the Pioneer Lead teacher is rooted in the recognition that teachers in rural schools already travel further to meetings than their colleagues in urban schools and that this has an impact on the experience of learners in schools and on teachers' wellbeing.

## Conclusion

The evidence of this exploratory study suggests that rural schools have embraced the opportunities presented by reform to address the limitations of the previous curriculum, creating something better suited to their learners' needs (Bauch, 2001). The data suggest that while rural schools face challenges, there are aspects of their current practice and their embeddedness in communities which provide a good foundation for subsidiarity and the development of an autonomous approach to curriculum. Pioneer Lead teachers and their headteachers are committed to collaborative working and 'shared sense-making' (Bascia *et al.*, 2014; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2018, p. 181; Tronsmo, 2019). The examples of Pioneer work undertaken by the schools demonstrate a capacity to assess and address learners' needs in a local context (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

One challenge is the pupils' and teachers' access to experiences out of school. For pupils, schools saw this aspect of learning as an essential contribution to learners' success (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Duncan, 2014) and felt that schools have a vital role developing 'cultural literacy'. Teachers in rural schools are similarly at a disadvantage in that their access to collaborative professional learning must be balanced against time out of school. In addition, teachers from rural schools felt at a disadvantage in comparison to more urban schools, lacking the networking opportunities more easily available in densely populated areas. Neither teachers nor headteachers are reluctant to participate but it must be acknowledged that travelling makes an additional demand on resources. Creative solutions are needed to enable staff and pupils from small, remote schools to participate fully in out of school experiences.

Staff expertise was valued in all schools but was framed differently in each context: in small rural schools, teachers' capacity to work outside their specialism was celebrated as a strength while in larger schools, the perceived threat to subject-specialisms through the AoLE was identified and neutralised (Priestley, 2011). It can be argued, however, that there is no real contradiction between the two positions. Each is an example of schools in unique contexts using staff resources in the most effective ways for their learners and developing a school ethos suited to their circumstances.

The study is limited in that only three schools were studied, each located in a small town serving both town and rural populations; rural schools in other contexts are not considered, nor are urban schools. The limited sample size generated a depth of data, revealing a diversity of approaches to the curriculum and of concerns in the three

schools. In exploring their reflections on the experience of Pioneer work, it appears that there is a capacity for autonomous responses making use of local resources to meet learners' needs. At the same time, schools are working within the national policy context which may generate tensions. Further research might investigate how a wider range of contexts influence curriculum reform, the development of autonomy and the negotiation of policy constraints. The data suggest, in accord with Clarke and O'Donoghue (2016), that if schools in Wales are to succeed in developing a curriculum for their learners, policy makers should recognise that a school's autonomy is framed by its unique context.

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## Data availability statement

The data is not available. All data was collected in Wales.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The AoLEs are: Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; Humanities; Science and Technology; Expressive Arts; Health and Wellbeing.

<sup>2</sup> Information on schools and catchments is taken from LEA and school websites. Further detail is not given to protect the anonymity of the schools.

<sup>3</sup> Cymraeg 2050 is Welsh Government's strategy for achieving one million Welsh speakers by 2050.

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